

The Focusing Community

by Kathleen N. McGuire, Ph.D.

The Focusing Community model for supportive community teaches two basic skills, Listening and Focusing, and shows how to use them for personal growth, helping others, and resolving conflicts in relationships and groups. It relies upon the mutual exchange of peer counseling turns, providing an alternative to traditional psychotherapy. The skills can be used in personal growth, work, and political action situations.

The exchange of Listening / Focusing turns creates an atmosphere of respect and empathy, which is basic to community building. The model has been developed in interaction with reevaluation cocounseling (Jackins, 1975), Rosenberg's (1983) nonviolent communication, and the Quaker meeting format for consensus. It combines aspects of these models with the client-centered/ existential work of Carl Rogers (1975) on empathic listening and Eugene Gendlin (1981) on experiential focusing.

In its simplest form, the model involves sitting down with one- to-ten friends, reading a manual on starting a supportive community (McGuire, 1981), and practicing Listening and Focusing skills. Each person has an equal turn as the helper (Listener) and the helpee (Focuser). After five to ten sessions of practice, participants learn to use the skills, not only for personal growth, but for conflict resolution in relationships and decision-making in groups.

People who exchange Listening/ Focusing turns also quickly find themselves becoming bonded together into a supportive community, which reaches into many aspects of their everyday living and enables them to be more politically responsive.

The personal growth skills stressed at a Focusing Community are not a luxury but a kind of psychological literacy that should be basic equipment for every human being. One skill practiced is Focusing: becoming aware of and responsible for one's own feelings and implicit bodily knowledge. Focusing is a way out of the irresponsibility that comes from blaming uncontrollable, "unconscious motivations" for one's behavior.

The other skill is Listening: being able to set aside stereotypes and prejudices and to meet another human being through empathy. Listening is a way of bridging the gaps in understanding that lie at the base of polarized and seemingly irresolvable conflicts.

Listening is the most valuable tool one can have on hand when wishing to change attitudes within a culture. A persuasive discussion with an everyday person about nuclear power, conservation, racism, sexism, alternative medicine, or another cause will go more smoothly if *first* you attempt to hear that person out on his or her view. Then, having felt heard, the person will be more willing to hear your alternative position. If threat runs high again, a return to Listening can defuse a potentially explosive situation. Listening/ Focusing skills are also essential for maintaining cohesion within social movement groups.

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While Listening/ Focusing can be practiced by as few as two people exchanging turns, it's better to have at least three, so that someone can act as observer and give feedback. Most typically, Listening/Focusing is practiced in a small group of four-to-six people, each having a 10-20 minute turn. It takes about ten 1 1/2 to 2 hour sessions to learn Listening well enough so that it will become available in less structured, everyday situations. My manual, *Focusing In Community*, gives detailed instructions for practicing Listening. The skills learned integrate well with Rosenberg's principles for compassionate communication and with reevaluation cocounseling.

Interpersonal processing

Interpersonal conflicts are an expected component of any attempt by people to live or work in a committed fashion. Intimacy often lies only on the other side of painful recognition of difference. Anyone who attempts to build working or living relationships without a tool for resolving difference is asking for failure.

Listening/ Focusing skills can be used to resolve conflict, often with the use of a third person as a listening facilitator. Whenever two people have an irresolvable tension, they can sit down for the exchange of empathic listening turns on the matter. The addition of the Focusing skill allows each participant to go below the level of communicating the already-known and into the deeper levels of the self that are involved in the conflict.

Often, such Focusing in the presence of empathic listening leads to vulnerable sharings, which immediately call forth a caring response from the other. A conflict can then be transformed into a mutual appreciation of inner needs and vulnerabilities, and a cooperative search for a mutually acceptable solution can begin.

Collaborative decision-making

The idea of consensus is basic to the Listening/ Focusing philosophy. When each person is treasured as unique and is expected to be doing his or her best at being authentically responsible for choosing and acting, it becomes impossible to rest easily with the idea of resolving conflict through a majority vote. What happens to the authentic being of the dissident? To ask him or her to merge into the decision of the group is to set up the conditions for the apathy that comes from foregoing responsible choice.

Instead, in collaborative decision-making, it is assumed that each person has legitimate concerns in his or her position, and decision-making continues until a solution is found that fits the needs of each participant, or, if time constraints intervene, until a Coordinator can craft a reasonable Gestalt out of the group process.

Although an image of consensual decision-making lasting long into the night strikes

fear into the hearts of many participants in political action groups, the process of consensus can be tremendously satisfying and need not last long, after some practice. Once a competitive win / lose approach has been given up for the assumption that each person will get what he or she needs, surprisingly creative alternatives start to arise. Absolutely essential aspects to be considered come from the mouths of the dissenting minority. The final decision is much more likely to be carried to a successful conclusion than that which would have been reached by majority vote.

The addition of Listening/ Focusing skills to traditional consensual methods and the possibility of felt shifts through Focusing add new possibilities for the resolution of conflict. Often, if a person can get listened to on his or her emotional investment in a particular position, something will emerge that will allow the person to see the situation from a slightly different angle. Or, as the group really hears someone's deep reasons for a particular position, someone in the group may suddenly see a new solution that encompasses everybody's needs. Having Listening / Focusing at a decision-making meeting is very much like having the services of a kaleidoscope. A slight turn of the problem through Listening and Focusing, and a whole new way of looking arise.